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SCIENCE, PSYCHIATRY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

UN's Mental Health Goals Off Track as Social Factors Remain Unaddressed, Study Shows

Researchers call for global policy change to align mental health spending with the social challenges of poverty, inequality, and neighborhood safety, based on the latest comprehensive review.

By **Liam Gehrig Bach** - May 10, 2024

A comprehensive review of reviews, led by researchers from King's College London and the University of Oxford, reveals a critical gap in global mental health policy implementation. The study, spearheaded by Tassia Kate Oswald, exposes how failure to tackle the social determinants of mental health is hindering the United Nations' progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), calling for a more strategic approach.

The researchers suggest that tackling social determinants is critical to addressing the mental disorders themselves and that global spending does not align with the promise set by the SDGs.

"Globally, mental disorders account for almost 20% of disease burden, with associated annual costs projected to be US$6 trillion by 2030. Accordingly, the United Nations (UN) has put forth the ambitious goal of achieving universal mental health care coverage by 2030 as a part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, in 2020 … only 2% of global government health expenditure was allocated to mental health, with significantly less in low-income countries. This suggests that goals to increase access to mental health treatments

alone are insufficient to reduce the burden of poor mental health globally."

Oswald's team reviewed over 20,000 articles, synthesizing 82 reviews to identify patterns across six domains: demographic, economic, environmental events, neighborhood, sociocultural, and multiple factors. While interventions like cash transfers and school-based social and emotional learning programs show promise, most approaches remain inadequate due to insufficient global attention on social determinants like poverty, inequality, and displacement. Their findings illustrate that without addressing the root social causes, the international mental health burden will remain significant, and the SDGs will continue to fall short.

The authors call for a strategic overhaul in international policy to meet the SDGs by addressing these systemic issues. Their study advocates for a multidisciplinary approach that links economic security, environmental resilience, and community empowerment to a holistic vision of mental well-being.

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Liam Gehrig Bach

Liam is a studying to complete his master's degree in animal studies at New York University. He graduated from Bard College as a biology/psychology double major and completed independent research about the psychology of perceiving conservation efforts. Liam is especially interested in using feminist and queer theory to unpack current systemic issues that affect otherized, marginalized groups. When he isn't writing, Liam is likely walking with his dogs.